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Speech and Writing: A Matter of Presence and Absence in A House for Mr Biswas

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Abstract

A great deal has been written about Mr Biswas's quest for identity, and critics are generally agreed that this search is inseparable from his search for a house.^ It has been insufficiently remarked, however, that the idea of identity is bound up with conceptions of language in A House for Mr Biswas. The ways in which language is conceived and used in the novel play a major role in the characterization and development of the protagonist. Somewhere between the group of foreign-looking old men who cannot speak English but 'are afraid to leave the familiar temporariness"^ or life in Trinidad, and the English speaking grandmother, Bipti, Mr Biswas flickers between states: identity and nonentity. This unstable situation is aggravated by the further complication that none of the categories themselves, Hindi-speaking, English-speaking, identity, nonentity, represents a stable position, positive or negative; hence Mr Biswas's dilemma.

Speech and Writing: A Matter of Presence and Absence in *A House for Mr Biswas*

The writer ... he is the last free man[1]
Language can be so deceptive[2]
V.S. Naipaul

A great deal has been written about Mr Biswas's quest for identity, and critics are generally agreed that this search is inseparable from his search for a house.[3] It has been insufficiently remarked, however, that the idea of identity is bound up with conceptions of language in *A House for Mr Biswas*. The ways in which language is conceived and used in the novel play a major role in the characterization and development of the protagonist. Somewhere between the group of foreign-looking old men who cannot speak English but 'are afraid to leave the familiar temporariness'[4] or life in Trinidad, and the English speaking grandmother, Bipti, Mr Biswas flickers between states: identity and nonentity. This unstable situation is aggravated by the further complication that none of the categories themselves, Hindi-speaking, English-speaking, identity, nonentity, represents a stable position, positive or negative; hence Mr Biswas's dilemma.

Naipaul himself articulates an acute awareness of the significant role that language plays in the lives of displaced, colonized people both on a national and individual level. He says of his own relationship to language:

> Every writer is in the long run on his own; but it helps to have a tradition. The English language was mine; the tradition was not.[5]

> I've decolonized myself through the practice of writing, through what I've learned from writing, looking at the world. But let me also add to this that I feel an enormous pain about the situation.[6]

Echoing in these remarks is, on the one hand, Naipaul's sense of loss in having to write in a tradition to which he feels alien, and, on the other hand, a sense of fulfilment through that very tradition. Of course achievement is qualified by the 'enormous pain about the situation.' Nevertheless, Naipaul's identity, his awareness of himself 'as a presence' both as writer and as man, is through language, through writing, to be exact.

Jacques Derrida has written about the tendency in Western culture to view writing as the secondary, and speech as the primary mode of communication.[7] This hierarchical approach to language is only one in an infinite list of linguistic couplings: good/evil, truth/falsehood, man/woman, white/black and so on. The tendency to privilege speech over writing, logocentrism, derives from the belief that language points transparently to some object or idea external to and independent of itself, and to which it plays a subordinate role. Speech, because it is direct, having no material interference such as words on a page, is able to convey reality directly. Speech has this special quality, it is believed, because like interior language, the language of silent communication with the self, it enables the speaker to hear himself speak. Speech, therefore, is associated with presence.

Writing, on the other hand, is a substitute for speech; it is necessary only when the speaker or conditions favouring personal direct communication are lacking. Consequently, it occurs as the imitation and corruption of speech, its authenticity forever called into question by its materiality. The written word is the mark of loss of community, or alienation, of absence.

Derrida himself rejects phonocentrism, the privileging of speech over writing. He maintains that language is marked by *differance*, a term he coined to mean 'to differ' and 'to defer' simultaneously.[8] The idea of the differential nature of language originated with Sassure and is based on the belief that there is no intrinsic relationship between the signifier and signified; for example, between the term 'role' and the concept it represents. There is no logical reason why the latter should not be called something else. The designation 'role' is arbitrary. We derive meaning from the term because we mentally differentiate it from other words which phonetically or conceptually fall within the same category, for example, 'dose' or dhalias.

Meaning is possible then as the outcome of the interplay of signs. That is, signs make sense to us only in so far as they relate to other signs, already encountered or to come, in a text. At the same time signs owe their identity to their difference from those very signs to which they relate. This relationship of difference and delay between signs accounts for the differential nature of the language, and the impossibility of definitive interpretation of texts. For, as Derrida concludes, meaning cannot be wholly present at any given moment; meaning is always being delayed. According to Roland Barthes, meaning is 'a timeless approximation',[9] it can be indefinitely deferred.

Derrida's comments on conceptions of language in Western society have a strong bearing on the theme of identity and its connection with conceptions

of language in *A House for Mr Biswas*. The theme of identity emerges quite early in the work. At the beginning of the second chapter we are told:

> Mr Biswas could never afterwards say exactly where his father's hut had stood ... when Mr Biswas looked for the place where he had spent his early years he saw nothing but oil derricks and grimy pumps, see-sawing, endlessly, surrounded by red No Smoking notices. His grandparents' house had also disappeared, and when huts of mud and grass are pulled down they leave no trace. His navel-string, buried on that inauspicious night, and his sixth finger, buried not long after, had turned to dust. The pond had been drained and the whole swamp region was now a garden city of white wooden bungalows with red roofs, cisterns on tall stilts, and neat gardens. The stream where he had watched the black fish had been dammed, diverted into a reservoir, and its winding, irregular bed covered by straight lawns, streets and drives. The world carried no witness to Mr Biswas's birth and early years. (p. 41)

The world carries only signs of Mr Biswas's absence. The 'No Smoking' notices, the oil derricks, the grimy pumps, by their presence, testify to Mr Biswas's non-existence; the bungalows with their neat gardens, the straight lawns, streets and drives are witness to the chaos that underpins his nothingness. From here on the narrative enacts Mr Biswas's struggle to realize his identity in a world of signs, signs that negate his presence.

He has no birth certificate nor any knowledge of his age. According to Lal, he does not 'even know how to born' (p. 42). He can enter school, cross an important initiatory boundary, only after Lal, agreeing with Bipti on a plausible birthdate, writes him into the role-book. And he is ushered into the world when Ghany, with his 'affidavits, stamps and things' (p. 44) writes his name and a date of birth on a piece of paper. Later, his occupations as sign writer, and then as journalist, link him to language of a most public kind. His relationship with fiction, indeed with writing as a whole (Samuel Smiles, Dickens, foreign magazines and newspapers), and his abortive attempts to become an author of fiction, emphasize the extent to which Mr Biswas's identity is bound up with the language or the written word. At one point he is imaged as a walking sign in his floursack pants which 'despite many washings were still bright with letters and even whole words' (pp. 102-3). As his identity is bound up in language, he must find himself through language.

At his earliest interaction with the world outside his home in the back trace Mr Biswas seems intuitively aware of the arbitrariness of the sign and therefore of its corruptibility. It is this awareness that enables him to triumph over Lal the school-teacher, who, versed in mechanical equation, 'one twos are two/Two twos are four' (p. 45), believes that if Mr Biswas writes 'I AM AN ASS' (P. 47) he will automatically be an ass. Lacing the letters with ironic energy, Mr Biswas subverts their expected effect. He divests the words of

meaning by focusing attention on their materiality and demonstrating their corruptibility. He 'outlined stylish, contemptuous letters and the class tittered approvingly' (p. 47).

The same principle of self-division and self-reflexive jest runs through the work Mr Biswas produces as sign painter and writer. In painting signs for the Tulsi store,

> He began by decorating the top of the back wall with an enormous sign. This he illustrated meaninglessly with a drawing of Punch who appeared incongruously gay and roguish in the austere shop where goods were stored rather than displayed and the assistants were grave and unenthusiastic. (p. 82)

And in negotiating with a potential customer who wants 'a lot of birds in the sign ... hanging about and behind the lettering' (p. 75), Alec and Mr Biswas, knowing that the latter cannot draw, conveniently convince the customer that the 'modern thing is to have a lot of words ... nothing but words' (p. 75). Since they cannot provide birds, words will do just as well. The play on the phonic and graphic relationship between the two terms juxtaposed against the unrelatedness of the sign that the customer finally gets – 'Idlers keep out' (p. 75) – demonstrates the arbitrariness of the sign, and foregrounds the play of difference that characterizes signs; it also sets the undertone of absurdity that runs though communicative activity in the novel: language is prone to subvert rather than articulate desire.

Interestingly, Mr Biswas is introduced to Hanuman House as communicator; he 'went to Hanuman House to paint signs' (p. 81). And it is during the execution of this duty that he writes the note to Shama, 'I love you and I want to talk to you' (p. 85). It is in this frame of reference therefore, that the note must be seen. through the note, the novel makes a radical distinction between speech and writing, presence and absence. Mr Biswas finds it necessary to communicate his wish to speak in writing. Speech, he believes, would be a 'low and possibly dangerous thing.' Besides, 'the presence of her (Shama's) sisters and brothers-in-law deterred him' (p. 82). As it turns out, however, it is the note that proves dangerous; it finds its way into the wrong hands. When Mr Biswas left the store 'the note was in Mrs Tulsi's hand. She held it just above the counter, far from her eyes and read it...' She 'nodded absently to her (Shama) still looking at the note' (p. 85).

The text highlights the relationship that develops between Mrs Tulsi's hand, the note and Mr Biswas:

> He heard a creak on the staircase and saw a long white skirt and a long white petticoat dancing above silver-braceleted ankles. It was Mrs Tulsi. ... Without acknowledging

his presence she sat on a bench and, as if already tired, rested her jewelled arms on the table. He saw that in one smooth ringed hand she was holding the note.
'You wrote this?'
He did his best to look puzzled. He stare hard at the note and stretched a hand to take it. Mrs tulsi pulled the note away and held it up.
'That? I didn't write that. Why should I want to write that?'
'I only thought so because somebody saw you put it down.' ...
'What?' Mr Biswas said 'Somebody saw me put *that* down?' ...
Mr Biswas was puzzled. It would have been more understandable if they had taken *his word* and asked him never to come to their house again. (Latter emphasis mine). (pp. 87-88)

When he attempts to defend himself against Mrs Tulsi's intimidation, 'She raised Mr Biswas's note with her free hand and said: "What's the matter?" (p. 90) or becomes "stern" and asks "Why did you write this then?" She waved the note.' (p. 91)

An incriminatory element, the materiality of the note and its public nature (he was seen putting it down), keeps obtruding on the scene. At the same time Mr Biswas's spoken 'word', that is, his voice or presence, is being ignored: 'without acknowledging his presence' Mrs Tulsi establishes the validity of the 'love letter' (p. 87). And as if to confirm Mr Biswas's absence she refers to him impersonally as 'the poor boy' and 'this person' (p. 89-91). To further heighten the sense of distance Mrs Tulsi is abbreviated to the impersonal white skirt, white petticoat, and a free, smooth, ringed and 'armoured hand'.

In *A House for Mr Biswas* writing is emphatically material, public and unpredictable; it may be misappropriated and misinterpreted. Mrs Tulsi reads 'I love you and I want to talk to you' (p. 85) as 'I love and want to marry the child,' her child. This interpretation makes her the logical recipient of a note that was not intended for her. The note leads Mr Biswas into a maze of unforeseen relationships. Writing, unlike huts of mud and grass, leaves an imprint or trace that will not only speak of but will speak *for* the subject – thus opening the way for him to be invalidated and exploited.

Speech, on the other hand, is a sign of self-presence, of the possibility of taking charge. 'How often in the years to come ... did Mr Biswas regret his weakness, his inarticulateness' (p. 91); his failure to speak is the cause of his entrapment, and speechlessness is weakness. If the latter is correct, then the ability to speak must be a sign of strength, or control. This conclusion is exactly what Mr Biswas's fictional version of his engagement to Shama implies:

> Well, I see this girl, you know. I see this girl and she was looking at me, and I was looking at she. So I give she a little of that old sweet talk and I see that she was liking me too. And, well, to cut a lot story short, I ask to see the mother. (pp. 92-93)

Of course, by the time he tells this story Mr Biswas 'began feeling that it was he who had acted...' (p. 93). His story is all about self-presence and control: 'I see', I 'speak', 'I act'.

The opposition between speech and writing has gradually emerged as an important discourse in the novel. In fact the text goes so far as to suggest that this contrast must be maintained. The danger in confusing the two is cogently demonstrated in Mr Biswas's presentation of his poem in memory of his mother to his literary group.

> ... he disgraced himself. Thinking himself free of what he had written, he ventured on his poem boldly, and even with a touch of self-mockery. But as he read, his hands began to shake, the paper rustled; and when he spoke of the journey his voice failed. It cracked and kept on cracking; his eyes tickled. But he went on, and his emotion was such that at the end no one said a word... He said nothing for the rest of the evening. (pp. 484-85)

Focusing on the written word, Mr Biswas approaches the poem as a distinctly external and public document. But presence, his voice, direct and intimate, impinges on his consciousness; he hears himself speak his writing. The two forms of communication, up to this point separate, have collapsed into one. The break-down results in paralysed communication; no one, including Mr Biswas, could continue to speak.

And yet, verbal paralysis is not limited to moments when distinctions collapse dramatically. To win favour in Hanuman House Mr Biswas 'held his tongue' (p. 188). In fact, in Hanuman House and its extensions, speech, when it is initiated, tends to freeze rather than inspire communication. That is not to say, however, that there are not occasions of constructive speech in the work; these will be touched upon later. But there is ample evidence of a link between impotence and speechlessness:[10] for some time after their wedding Mr Biswas, wishing to avoid the final commitment, does not speak to Shama; 'he wouldn't have known, besides, how to begin, with someone who had not spoken a word to him ...' (pp. 96-97). And when after days of desertion he returns to Hanuman House, their exchange of words is not calculated to improve communication between them:

> 'What?' Shama said in English, 'You come back already? You tired catching crab in Pagotes?'
> ... the crab-catcher was considered the lowest of the low.
> 'I thought I would come and help all-you catch some here' Mr Biswas replied, and killed the giggles in the hall
> No other comment was made. (p. 102)

This interchange, meant to hurt and humiliate, is also guaranteed to kill any chances there might be of open constructive intercourse. The novel is full of benumbing verbal confrontations such as this, and these clashes are invariably accompanied by appalling silence as if some violence had been wreaked on speaker and hearer(s). Indeed, speech often erupts into violence or takes place as a result of violence. When, during an argument, Mr Biswas hits Shama, 'she was silenced in the middle of a sentence,' and 'for some time afterwards the unfinished sentence remained in his mind...' (p. 192). In response to Shama's destruction of the doll's house Mr Biswas hurls abuse at her, 'You bitch'. Following this outburst 'the silence was absolute.' Mr Biswas 'could think of nothing to say.' (p. 220)

It is interesting that it is during one of these moments of violence and silence that Mr Biswas makes his final break from the Tulsi house in which his writing had trapped him. The card game between Anand, Owad and Shekkar ends when Owad slaps Anand. In his humiliation, the thing Anand is most conscious of is the 'silence of the house' (p. 550). Later, when on Shama's insistence Anand attempts to apologise to Owad, 'the talk stopped'; among the cousins and aunts, 'there was silence'; 'there was no word' (p. 554) for some time. During the ensuing outbreak of verbal abuse between Mr Tulsi and Mr Biswas, Shama cautions him; 'Hold your damned tongue' (p. 556); and as Mr Biswas shouts his intention to leave the house, 'there was an abrupt silence'; 'the house was absolutely silent'. Mr Biswas's children 'remained appalled in the room not daring to move to break the silence' (p. 557). These are only a few of the numerous situations involving speechlessness in *A House for Mr Biswas*, and each incident of muteness is a direct consequence of the way in which characters use language.

The interchange between Shama and Mr Biswas that was quoted above is substitutive. In referring to her husband as crab-catcher Shama categorizes and diminishes him, forcing him to respond in a limited and limitting manner. Communication between characters, particularly at Hanuman House and its extensions – The Chase, Shorthills, the Port of Spain house, Green Vale – follows this pattern generally. Mr Biswas refers to Mrs Tulsi metaphorically as 'the old queen'; 'the old hen', 'the old cow' (p. 104), 'the she-fox' (p. 129); to Seth as 'the big bull' (p. 117), to Shekkar and Owad as 'the little gods' (p. 104). Seth calls Mr Biswas 'the paddler' (p. 109). Various other such alienating substitutive appellations are hurled from one character to another from time to time.

According to Roman Jakobson's study, 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbance,' substitutive language (such as that practised in *A House for Mr Biswas*) is the symptom of verbal disorder.

> The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively. In aphasia, one or the other of these two processes is restricted or totally blocked – an effect which makes the study of aphasia particularly illuminating for the linguist. In normal verbal behaviour both processes are continually operative but careful observation will reveal that under the influence of cultural pattern, personality and verbal style, preference is given to one of the two processes over the other.[11]

In normal communication the speaker or writer chooses from a range of equivalences available to him and combines the selected words to produce coherent utterances. Both axes, the selective or metaphoric and the associative or metonymic, must be in operation if language is to be functionally successful. Characters in *A House for Mr Biswas* exhibit partiality for selective or substitutive language; this partiality checks the balanced flow of communication that is possible when both the combinative and substitutive processes operate together. Substitution based on identity, for example, crab-catcher the lowest of the low (a term suggesting hierarchical distancing) for husband (a term suggesting connection) separates characters. It blocks the associative connectedness, Biswas – husband – father – son-in-law, uncle etc., that is possible and which encourages rather than severs communicative links. Characters in *A House for Mr Biswas* have lost the ability to speak.

Restricted verbal behaviour in the novel may be the linguistic exemplification of a limited existence. The terms of survival in Hanuman House demand subjugation. 'The Tulsi women and children swept and washed and cooked and served in the store.' (p. 97) The husbands and fathers till the Tulsi land, tend the Tulsi animals and help in the Tulsi store. Under these arrangements, they, the husbands, are provided with room and board for themselves and their families. Meanwhile, 'their names were forgotten, they became Tulsis.' (p. 97)[12] Mr Biswas rebels against this disregard for his individuality verbally. He hurls invectives at the family continually. On one of these occasions, he gargles loudly, 'indulging at the same time in vile abuse of the family knowing that the gargling distorted his words.' He then 'spat the water down venomously to the yard below', telling Shama, 'I just hoping I spit on some of your family.' (p. 105) Speech registers his contempt, but it achieves little else. His speech is by necessity distorted, inauthentic. Thus the more he speaks, or rather, spits his words, the more frustrated he becomes: 'his status there was now fixed. He was troublesome and disloyal

and could not be trusted. He was weak and therefore contemptible.' (p. 102) Speech cannot liberate him.

The only means of self-expression open to Mr Biswas is writing. As pointed out before, he has a special relationship with the written word. But if the collapse of the opposition between writing and speech leads to verbal disorders, will not the substitution of writing for the speech/writing opposition lead to a similar 'aphasic' condition? Writing in *A House for Mr Biswas* is not the result simply of collapse or of substitution.

The tyranny of writing in *A House for Mr Biswas* has its roots in fundamental historical and social conditions.[13] Authentic, that is, undistorted, speech in the novel is usually in Hindi; Shama comforts Mr Biswas after his mother's death in Hindi; she persuades Anand to apologise to Owad and ease family tension in Hindi. At these moments speech is intimate, reconciliatory. But English is 'the language of the law', (p. 175) the language that Hindi-speaking Trinidadians must master if they are to succeed in a worlds where formal education is vital. According to Naipaul 'education is desirable because it may lead to security'.[14] But this education is based on an alien and alienating colonial system: one has but to examine Mr Biswas's lessons on writing from the Ideal School of Journalism, Edgware Road, London, which not only teaches but markets language, and whose secret of every short story plot in the world is lodged in the British Museum in London. The implications are disturbing to say the least.

The text's association of English Language with Law, school compositions, scholarships, travel to Europe and professional pursuit, in other words with Europeanization, ties the language generally to writing. In *A Bend in the River* Naipaul's narrator says:

> We simply lived; we did what was expected of us, what we had seen previous generations do. We never recorded ... We felt in our bones that we were a very old people; but we seemed to have no means of gauging the passing of time. Neither my father nor my grandfather could put dates to their stories.
>
> ... All that I know of our history and the history of the Indian Ocean I have got from books written by Europeans ... Without Europeans, I feel, all our past would have been washed away like the scuffmarks of fishermen on the beach ... (or like huts of mud and grass).[15]

These remarks have troubling implications: the world, or more particularly, the Third world, was called into being not by Divine Speech but by the Written Word of the European. And since the inhabitants of the Third World depend for their history or identity on European documentation then it is in the very sign of their non-existence that their

presence is possible. The problems that this solution poses have been demonstrated: writing is material, corruptible and corrupting; it leads to misappropriation, misinterpretation, exploitation; it may misrepresent, even negate its subject. Identity bearing this legacy is tenuous at best.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Mr Biswas's search for identity, unlike that of Stephen Dedalus or of Melville's Ishmael, should be given such specific spatial and material signification. The materiality of writing, Naipaul's linking of writing to history and identity, Mr Biswas's determination to leave a *mark* or dwelling behind to speak for him, connects the theme of writing to the central motif in the novel, the house. Moreover, the acquisition of the house is the laying of one's 'claim to one's portion of the earth' (p. 14), an attempt to ground or pin down an elusive dream. The house, like an inscription promises permanence, albeit a troubling one. But signs of his identity, when Mr Biswas finds them, tend to evaporate, leaving the void that threatens him. At one stage, while at The Chase, Mr Biswas noted that the shop 'bore ... marks of his habitation': 'no one might have lived there before him, and it was hard to imagine anyone after him moving about these rooms and getting to know them as he had done.' (p. 186-7) But 'everything, the land at Green Vale, the shop at The Chase, belong simply to the House,' (p. 390= Hanuman House, the 'engulfing world of the Tulsis' (p. 40) where there is nothing to speak of him and where the threat of extinction plagues him. The marks of Mr Biswas's habitation gather only to cancel themselves out.

He knows what kind of house he wants; what inscription he wishes to leave:

> He had thought deeply about this house and know exactly what he wanted. He wanted, in the first place, a real house, made with real materials. He didn't want mud for walls, earth for floor, tree branches for rafters and grass for roof. He wanted wooden walls, all tongue-and-groove. He wanted a galvanized iron roof and a wooden ceiling. He would walk up concrete steps into a small verandah; through doors with coloured panes into a small drawing-room; from there into small bedroom, then another small bedroom, then back into a small verandah. The house would stand on tall concrete pillars so that he would get two floors instead on one, and the way would be left open for future development ... and his house would be painted ... (pp. 210-211)

The houses that Mr Biswas occupies then, even the final house at Sikkim Street, his house, are no more than signs of his desire. Like the doll's house he brought for Savi, they are merely the reification of the lack Mr Biswas so desperately feels. The symbol of the doll's house recurs to underscore this point.

> He fixed his eyes on a house as small and as neat as a doll's house, on the distant hills of the Northern Range; and as the bus moved north, he allowed himself to be puzzled that the house did not grow any bigger, and to wonder, as a child might, whether the bus would eventually come to that house. (p. 308)

The bus never gets to that house; Mr Biswas's desire is never fulfilled. At every turn, his family discover another deficiency in the house at Sikkim Street. Its description is a catalogue of what a house is not. They occupy their time camouflaging these deficiencies, but the act of covering-up highlights the defects relentlessly. The family is forced to use the same deception on the Tuttles that the solicitor's clerk used on them: make the camouflage pass for the house:

> curtains masked the staircase; the bookcase and the glass cabinet hid part of the lattice work, which was also draped with curtains ... The door that couldn't open was left shut; and a curtain hung over that. The windows that couldn't close were left open ... the Tuttles were taken in (p.579).

The house at Sikkim Street, like all Mr Biswas's other places of abode, is a sign of lack, of absence.

From the outset one sign has led to another, indefinitely deferring the fulfilment of his dream. The novel is punctuated with the differing, deferring terms of waiting. At the outset, Mr Biswas began 'to wait, not only for love, but for the world to yield its sweetness and romance' (p.. 80). 'Real life was to begin ... soon ... The Chase was a pause, a preparation.' (p. 147) Then 'He was going out into the world to test it for its power to frighten. The past was counterfeit, a series of cheating accidents. Real life, and its especial sweetness, awaiting; he was still beginning' (p. 305). Still later, Mr Biswas 'was waiting for improvements ... For him Shorthills was an adventure, an interlude' (p. 402). At the end 'There was nothing Mr Biswas could do but wait. Wait for Anand. Wait for Savi. Wait for the five years to come to an end. Wait, Wait' (pp. 586-7).

NOTES

1. 'The Writer' in *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, ed. Robert D. Hamner (London: Heinemann, 1979), p. 30.
2. 'Jasmine' in *Critical Perspectives*, p. 20.
3. See for example, R.H. Lee, 'The Novels of V.S. Naipaul', in *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, ed. Robert D. Hamner (London: Heinemann, 1977), pp. 74-79; Bruce McDonald, 'Symbolic Action in Three of V.S. Naipaul's Novels' in *Critical Perspectives*, pp. 245-249; Landeg White, *V.S. Naipaul: A Critical Introduction* (London: Macmillan Press, 1975), pp. 86-125; Anthony Boxill, *V.S. Naipaul's Fiction* (Frederiction: York Press, 1983), pp. 33-34.

4. A House for Mr Biswas (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 194. All further references to this work will be intext notes within parentheses.
5. 'Jasmine', p. 19.
6. 'Portrait of An Artist: What makes Naipaul Run', *Caribbean Contact* 1, 6 (May 1973) p. 18, as quoted in 'V.S. Naipaul's Third World: A Not So Free State', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 10, 1(1975), 21.
7. *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore; Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 6-93.
8. See 'Difference' in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans, Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 1-27.
9. *SZ*, Trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 11.
10. I am using the word, impotence, in both its sexual and broader sense.
11. *Selected Writings* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), II, 239- 259.
12. Gordon Rohlehr views Hanuman House 'not as an admirable reconstruction of the clan but as a slave society, erected by Mrs Tulsi and Seth who need workers', and who exploit the homeless and the poor. 'Character and Rebellion in *A House for Mr Biswas*, in *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, p. 87.
13. In her essay 'Cultural Confrontation, Disintegration and Sycretism in *A House for Mr Biswas*', Maureen Warner Lewis interprets the novel as Naipaul's examination of historical, social and cultural contradictions in the society.
14. 'London', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 15 August 1958, as quoted in Critical Perspectives, p. 5.
15. *A Bend in the River* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), pp. 17-18.